



JOSE LUIS MAGANA Associated Press

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice seals an official document as National Archivist Allen Weinstein, right, looks on at the State Department in Washington on Tuesday during a ceremony commemorating the 225th anniversary of the Great Seal of the United States.

Rice reveals Great Seal's secrets

Its powerful symbols popular element of conspiracy theories

BY MATTHEW LEE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Conspiracy theorists take note: The myths surrounding one of America's oldest and most enduring national symbols are about to be debunked . . . if you believe the government, that is.

The keepers of the Great Seal of the United States, the familiar emblem on the back of the \$1 bill, want you to know what it is not. It is not a sign that Freemasons run the country, it has nothing to do with the occult, and it does not contain clues to a fabulous hidden treasure.

It is rather the nation's stamp of authority, sovereignty and power, gracing our cash and embossing the most important of documents from its home at the State Department, which has held it since the days of Thomas Jefferson, the first secretary of state.

Not that the Seal's symbols — the all-seeing eye, the unfinished pyramid, the Latin phrases, the bald eagle clutching an olive branch and arrows and the number 13 — aren't powerful.

They are, historians say. Yet their meanings have been misidentified, misunderstood and

misrepresented almost since the Continental Congress first commissioned the Seal in 1776.

The Internet age has seen an explosion in such conspiracy theories, many which have now been ingrained in public consciousness through the popular "National Treasure" movie franchise.

Among them:

- That the Seal proves the domination of the United States by a powerful, quasi-religious cult. The Ancient Scottish Rite of Freemasonry is a perennial favorite of conspiracy theorists as some Founding Fathers were Masons and the Seal uses several Masonic symbols.

- That the Seal draws on Satanism or polytheistic ritual to promote a universal new world order under which Earth would be ruled by a single omnipotent government.

- That repeated references to 13 — the number of steps in the unfinished pyramid, stars in the constellation over the eagle's head, arrows in the eagle's claw, stripes on the eagle's shield, letters in the phrase "Annuit Coeptis" — demonstrate the power of 13 American families.

All rubbish, according to historians, who say the Seal's symbolism is far less ominous or revelatory than many believe.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the Seal's 66th and current custodian, on Tuesday inaugurated a new exhibition to

commemorate its 225th birthday and trace the history and evolution of the symbolism.

"This exhibit honoring the Great Seal affirms our continued belief in the values of our founding," she said. "The Great Seal symbolizes the unity, strength and independence of a new nation, the United States of America."

Among the highlights:

- That known Masons like the first U.S. president, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin had no role in designing the final seal, which uses elements of traditional heraldry, such as the unfinished pyramid to symbolize a work in progress, arrows for war and an olive branch for peace. Masons share some of those symbols, but they have never been exclusively the domain of the order.

- That the phrase "Novus Ordo Seclorum" below the Roman numerals for 1776 at the base of the pyramid translates as "A New Order of the Ages" that began with independence and does not imply the United States will be the linchpin of a sinister "New World Order."

- That the references to 13 refer to the number of colonies that formed the original United States. "The hidden treasure in the Seal is the courage and presence of mind of the people who created it and created these values for the whole country," said Priscilla Linn, senior curator at the U.S. Diplomacy Center.